

Looking for Castles

“It’s just a little poem about the sea...How about trying that game?”

I stare behind Mrs Sala’s head. My spiky hair casts a shadow on the wall.

“Rafael, if you don’t complete the section all your work will be for nothing.”

I look down at my hands.

“Sea?” she says softly.

“Water,” I reply.

“Fish?”

“Fishermen.”

She smiles. “Coast?”

My pause is as brief as a heartbeat.

“Sand.”

“Rafael...I need an idea on paper soon.”

“I know. I’ll think about it.”

I leave Mrs Sala’s office and walk back to my classroom. I decide not to go in. I pass the reception and take the stairs two at a time.

Outside the air smells of wood smoke and the autumn chill creeps down my neck.

The plaza is empty as usual. I step up onto the wooden bench in front of the church and sit on the back. I can’t sit on benches normally. I like to be higher up, like a watchman.

I light a cigarette. It’s my father’s and I can only steal one at a time. With every week he doesn’t work he smokes more. It isn’t grey hairs in my father’s

moustache but ash. Maybe he will fall asleep with a cigarette in his mouth and burn it off. Who will he blame for that? The man who made the cigarette or the one with the dark skin that sold it to him?

My dad is a builder who doesn't build. The people who keep arriving in boats have robbed him of his work. Last summer all he talked about was this invasion of lawless tribes.

"Why do we have an immigration policy if the Red Cross runs out to collect them as soon as they appear?" he shouted over the steering wheel.

We were on our way to the beach at the time.

He turned to me.

"What do you want to be son?"

He knew I wanted to be a builder; he just wanted to hear it again.

"I can't watch them take what is rightfully yours, Rafael... "

"They won't take anything from me!" I told him fiercely.

I stub out my cigarette on the back of the bench. My hand is shaking.

When class is finished I will find my group. Although I crave this solitude, I feel it eating me up. My mind is locked in that day.

I was making a castle. Not a childish sandcastle made with one bucket and a flag; that's what I call a sand shit. I was planning entrances, banquet halls and quarters for the servants. My dad was lying flat on his back, sleeping off lunch; his open shirt fluttered in the salty breeze.

My castle was weak and melting back to desert. Instead of getting water from the shore, I went to explore a rockier area. I wanted to build strong foundations so that my creation would not collapse.

Mrs Sala wants to know what I think of when she says 'coast'. It should be the flavour of fried fish in the air. Squid freshly caught in a fisherman's bucket. My family happy together. Our fingers yellowed with saffron, greasy from peeling prawns.

But Coast is what I found when I looked at those rocks. Coast is a black man unable to pull himself out of the water. His face lay on its side and his eyes were open. I thought he might be dead but then I heard his low groan. He knew I was there.

The sand gave way as I ran and it seemed to take forever to get back. I could see the Red Cross vans waiting in the distance. But as I reached my father I slowed down. He was sitting up on his elbows.

"What did you find?" he said.

He was looking at me carefully. I felt suddenly afraid.

"Nothing," I said.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes I'm sure."

We went home because I felt sick. I didn't finish my castle.

Across the plaza I see the café has opened. My hands are freezing. I get up and head towards it. My father and I used to sit at the first table by the window, back when I could look into his eyes.

As I wait for my coffee a black man comes in and my heart starts pounding. He doesn't recognise me because it is not him. He is just another man looking to keep out the cold.

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